

Voters Judge Watergate

Our position remains firm that the true test of the effects of Watergate lies with the people, and that though a major phalanx of the GOP hierarchy seems to be corroded with scandal, the rank and file precinct worker is above reproach and this will be proved at the polls in upcoming elections.

Frederick County Republicans can no more be blamed for "the mess" than the Democrats.

This position was upheld recently by Newspaper Enterprise Association editorial writer Don Oakley who said that "Watergate was not the Grand Old Party's fault."

The same position has been supported by Democrats, including one of the party's youngest U.S. Senators.

Oakley holds that "clipping one's opponent on the football field is bad enough." He adds:

"What the Watergate conspirators did was like slipping sleeping pills into the other team's water bucket."

"In other words, it was an entirely different category of offense from the usual nasty tricks political rivals play on one another."

The homely image of the playing field was suggested by Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat from Delaware, speaking at a recent City Club Forum in Cleveland as a last-minute substitute for one of the many casualties of the Watergate explosion — resigned White House aide John D. Ehrlichman.

"The importance of Watergate is not the bugging of telephones, it is the massive assault on the system," said Biden, "—eliminating the field of contenders and subverting the system."

"If the allegations are true, then those who took part in it crippled the other team before it got on the playing field."

Yet the senator warned his fellow Democrats that it would be morally wrong to blame the Republican party for Watergate. As a party, the Republicans had nothing to do with it.

Not only that, he pointed out, but not one person involved so far is a politician. They are all administrative bureaucrats.

"We are a product of our political system," said Biden. "What holds us together as a nation are not

cultural ties as in other countries but political ties. We are able to move forward because of politics. If we bring down a great political party, we bring down our political system."

At 30 years of age, Biden is the nation's youngest senator. He makes more sense than some of the solons who have been in office that long.

DESPITE WATERGATE

Even as the journalism fraternity is congratulating itself on its exposure of the Watergate mess and the administration is, to put it mildly, on the defensive because of it, comes a warning that government activities continue to threaten freedom of the press, in the wildest meaning of the term.

Government measures attacking the economic capability of the television networks are just as much a threat to journalistic freedom as efforts to stifle free expression, says Robert W. Sarnoff, chairman of RCA.

And "an attack on one news medium," he warns, "is an attack on all."

In his own medium, he told a recent NBC Television Network Affiliates convention in Los Angeles, the attack is in the form of attempts to weaken the economic structure of networking under the pretext of "localism" which, he says, could impede the flow of independent information to the people.

He is not, he says, suggesting that the government has adopted such a design. "But I am concerned that an atmosphere has developed where networks are perceived as fair game."

In noncommercial television, he says, we have been witnessing another variation. There, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, controlled directly by government appointees, has been dismantling national news and public affairs programming.

As for the broader threat to journalistic freedom, Sarnoff cites the "unprecedented spectacle" of high federal officials attacking the national news media in general, the increasingly common device of subjecting investigative reporters to subpoenas and the threat of jail sentences and the use of official

secrecy as a cloak for official mistakes and derelictions.

"Whichever of these different means of suppression is employed, the effect is to deprive the public of what it needs to know in a free society," he says.

"What the government wants is a tamed press," alleges Sarnoff, and its efforts to make the news media docile and accommodating rely heavily on the technique of intimidation."

But he adds, "This technique works only against those who are willing to be timid."

WATERGATE

Viewer reaction to the Senate's televised Watergate hearings suggests that even the Second Coming would upset a lot of people if it occurred in prime time or interrupted afternoon soap operas.

Stations in cities across the nation report that most people writing or calling in have protested the preemption of their favorite programs.

It's true that people are always readier to complain about something they don't like than to praise something they do like. It's also true that a lot of people may simply be fed up with Watergate.

But it may also be wondered how many of those who consistently criticize the medium for being devoted solely to peddling detergents and deodorants to the greatest number have taken the trouble to let their local outlets know that they appreciate this effort to provide a public service.